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THE DISINTEGRATION  
OF SHAKESPEARE

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E. K. CHAMBERS

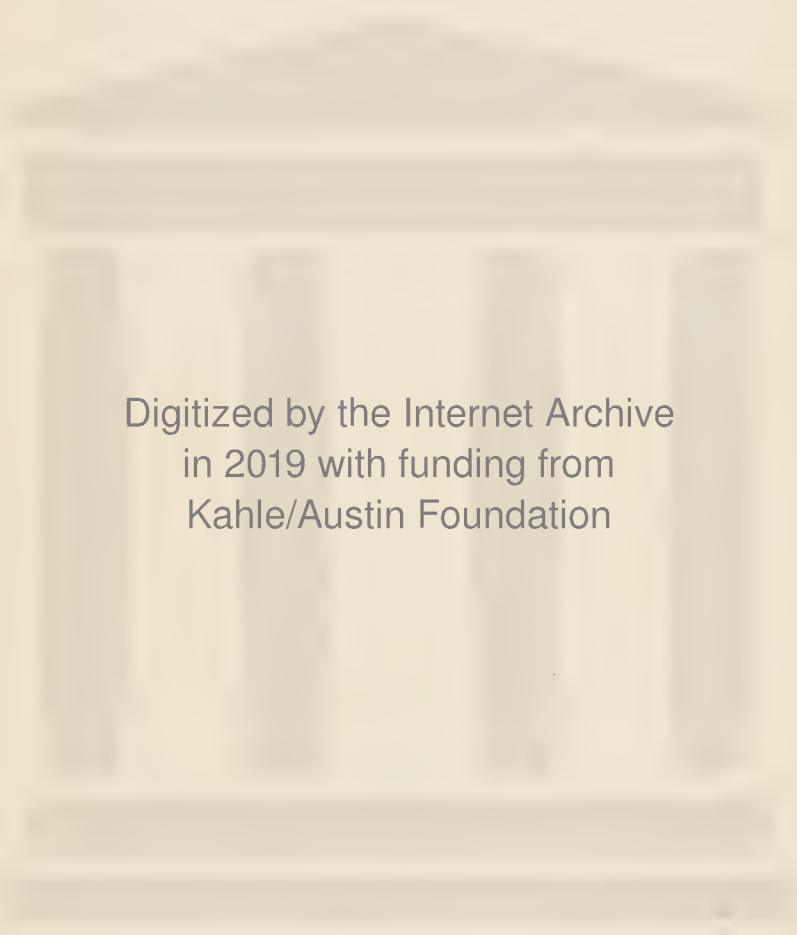
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ANNUAL SHAKESPEARE LECTURE, 1924

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By E. K. CHAMBERS, C.B., Hon. D.Litt.

*Read May 12, 1924*

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### THE DISINTEGRATION OF SHAKESPEARE

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THE rock of Shakespeare's reputation stands four-square to the winds of Time. But the waves of criticism beat perpetually about its base, and at intervals we must stand back and re-affirm our vision of the structural outlines. It is perhaps in itself a tribute to the wide appeal of the poet that so much of what is written about him is ill-informed and ill-balanced. Small minds are caught by, and fail to comprehend, that greatness and that variability. Hence the scouring of the *Dictionary of National Biography* for an alternative author, preferably aristocratic, of the plays. With these paradoxes I do not propose to concern myself. Doubtless they should be refuted, that the people be not deceived, but the task must be left to some one with a better temper for the patient anatomizing of human follies. This is but the spindrift on the face of the rock.

I propose to consider certain critical tendencies which, in their extreme manifestations, offer results hardly less perturbing than those with which the Baconians and their kin would make our flesh creep. This is the argument. Here are thirty-six plays handed down as Shakespeare's. You can put them in approximate chronological order, and arrive at a conception of the author's trend of development, both in mental outlook and in habits of diction and versification. But a closer analysis often reveals the co-existence in one and the same play of features belonging to different stages of the development, and sometimes of features which it is difficult to place in the line of development at all. Moreover, an examination of the texts shows such eccentricities and dislocations as to raise a doubt whether they can have come to us just as Shakespeare left them. Tracing these clues, our critics arrive at three results, on which

varying degrees of stress are laid. Firstly, the extant texts, many of them not printed until several years after Shakespeare's death, have often been altered or abbreviated by other hands. Secondly, Shakespeare revised his plays, and the extant texts sometimes contain fragments of different recensions, in juxtaposition or overlay. Thirdly, the process of revision by Shakespeare was not confined to his own work; he also rehandled the work of other men, and left some or much of it standing in the texts. And if you ask how far this process of revision went, and whether it seriously qualifies the accepted Shakespearian authorship of the plays, you do not get reassuring answers. One man will tell you frankly that in many plays which you thought characteristically Shakespearian—*Richard II*, *Henry V*, *Julius Caesar*, for example—Shakespeare's part was quite subordinate. Another will fence with the issue, and explain that the conception of individual authorship is not altogether applicable to Elizabethan plays. The playing companies kept standing texts in their repertories, and one man after another brought them up to date, often over a long period of years, as theatrical needs required or literary fashions changed, so that a drama must really be thought of as an impersonal or communal affair, like a folk-lyric.

Well, you cannot brush away these speculations quite so easily as you can those of the Baconians. Keen wits are at work; well-equipped and painstaking minds have stated their theories—their heresies, if you will—and they demand scrutiny. We must follow the *Logos* where it leads. Obviously, one cannot take the matter far in an isolated lecture. Each of the impugned plays requires its individual examination. This must be based upon a patient analysis of the texts available. It must take account of what can be gleaned of the literary habits of the time; of the possibilities of sophistication latent in the activities of stage book-keepers and adapters, of copyists, of censors, of compositors and correctors of the press. The disintegrating critics give us no less; we owe them no less. I can only hope to make some general survey of the ground, and to chart some of the avenues of approach.

The traditional canon of the plays has a five-fold basis. Thirty-six plays were ascribed to Shakespeare in the First Folio. Thirteen of these had already been printed as his in quarto. Eleven had been ascribed to him by Francis Meres in 1598. Five are ascribed to him by other contemporaries.<sup>1</sup> This is external evidence. There is also such internal evidence as the plays themselves bear to the presence

<sup>1</sup> *Romeo and Juliet* and *Richard II* or *III*, by John Weever; *Hamlet*, by Gabriel Harvey; *Julius Caesar* and *Winter's Tale*, by Ben Jonson.



of a single 'shaping spirit of imagination'. It is, of course, primarily this internal evidence which the disintegrators, at this and that point, dispute. The external evidence they have merely to explain away. You can always explain away a historical record, with a sufficient licence of conjecture as to the *mala fides* of its origin. The earliest whisper against the authenticity of any play in the canon comes, I think, from Edward Ravenscroft. Ravenscroft adapted *Titus Andronicus* after the Restoration, and, when he printed it in 1687, said that he had been told by 'some anciently conversant with the stage' that the model was not originally Shakespeare's, 'but brought by a private author to be acted, and he only gave some master touches to one or two of the principal parts or characters'. We do not know who were Ravenscroft's informants. At least one old actor, William Beeston, whose father had been a 'fellow' of Shakespeare, and who may himself have known Shakespeare in his boyhood, survived to 1682. A true report is not, therefore, inconceivable. Eighteenth-century scepticism was not slow to seize upon this notion of revisional work by Shakespeare, and to give it a further extension. You find the substantial Shakespearian authorship of *Comedy of Errors*, *Love's Labour's Lost*, and oddly enough *Winter's Tale*, doubted by Pope (1725), of *Henry V* by Theobald (1734), of *Two Gentlemen of Verona* by Hanmer (1743), of *Richard II* by Johnson (1765), of *Taming of the Shrew* by Farmer (1767). It would be idle to raise the dust of the resultant controversies, in which the conservative side was taken by Edward Capell. The assailants were confident and impressionist. Ritson tells us that in *Two Gentlemen*, *Love's Labour's Lost*, and *Richard II*, 'Shakespeare's new work is as apparent as the brightest touches of Titian would be on the poorest performance of the veriest canvas spoiler that ever handled a brush'. The mutterings were largely silenced by the authority of Malone, who accepted Ravenscroft's account of *Titus Andronicus*, worked out the relation of 2 and 3 *Henry VI* to the *Contention* plays, took Shakespeare for their reviser, supposed *Henry VIII* to have undergone revision by a later hand, and beyond these only doubted 1 *Henry VI*, the admission of which to the Folio he explained by Shakespeare's contribution of the Talbot scenes. Pope and the rest had been misled by inadequate attention to the chronology of the plays, which Malone was himself the first to study in detail, and by a consequent failure to distinguish between the criteria applicable to Shakespeare's juvenile and to his mature work. Malone's conclusions determined critical orthodoxy for the best part of a century. There were individual dissentients, notably Coleridge,

who questioned much of *Richard III* and the 'low soliloquy' of the Porter in *Macbeth*, and declared in his table-talk, 'I think I could point out to half a line what is really Shakespeare's in *Love's Labour's Lost* and some other of the not entirely genuine plays'. Coleridge being Coleridge, it is needless to say that he never performed this task. Charles Knight (*c.* 1843) suggested that Shakespeare was only a reviser of *Timon of Athens*; James Spedding and Alfred Tennyson (*c.* 1850) fixed the second hand in *Henry VIII* as that of Fletcher; and William George Clark and William Aldis Wright (1874) elaborated Coleridge's heresy about *Macbeth* by ascribing substantial interpolations in that play to Middleton.

Modern criticism of the canon, however, mainly owes its origin to F. G. Fleay, whose views, after fluttering the dove-cotes of the New Shakspeare Society, were collected in his *Shakespeare Manual* (1876), thereafter underwent Protean transformations, and took final shape in his *Life and Work of Shakespeare* (1886). Fleay had read widely in dramatic literature, and had made a close study of the early texts, the diction, and particularly the versification, of Shakespeare. He came to distrust the received chronology, because it assigned single dates to plays which seemed to him to bear stylistic marks of more than one period. And he arrived at a theory of constant rehandling and of the co-existence in the texts of strata belonging to different dates. This he applied, at one time or another, and with frequent variations in the dates assigned, to thirteen of the thirty-six plays: *Comedy of Errors*, *Two Gentlemen*, *Love's Labour's Lost*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *A Midsummer-Night's Dream*, *Richard II*, *Much Ado*, *Hamlet*, *Merry Wives*, *Twelfth Night*, *All's Well*, *Troilus and Cressida*, *Cymbeline*. As to the occasions of such revision he speaks with an uncertain voice. One group of plays may have been re-written, either for stage revival or for publication. Of another he suggests that fragments left unfinished at an early date were completed a decade later. But this notion is abandoned in favour of a supposed desire to replace work of an early coadjutor by Shakespeare's own. It is an easy step from Shakespeare as a reviser of Shakespeare to Shakespeare as a reviser of predecessors, Fleay distributed and redistributed *Henry VI*, *Richard III*, and *Titus Andronicus* among Shakespeare, Marlowe, Greene, Peele, Lodge, and Kyd; found much of Lodge and a little of Drayton in *Taming of the Shrew*, traces of Peele in *Romeo and Juliet*, traces of Kyd in *Hamlet*, debris of Dekker and Chettle in *Troilus and Cressida*. He pressed the doctrine of Middleton in *Macbeth*, but became doubtful about it; thought the second hand in *Timon* Tourneur's, and dropped

him lightly for Wilkins; supposed the mask in *The Tempest* an interpolation by Beaumont. Perhaps his most revolutionary hypothesis was upon *Julius Caesar*, which he held to have been abridged and altered by Ben Jonson, as an appropriate return for an equally conjectural contribution by Shakespeare to a lost version of *Sejanus*. We approach the point where scholarship merges itself in romance. I desire to speak with respect and even kindness of Fleay, from whom, in common in many others, I derived an early stimulus to these studies. He was a man of fertile and ingenious mind. He laid his finger upon many of the bibliographical and stylistic features of the plays which loom large in current speculations. But he had a demon of inaccuracy, which was unfortunate, as he relied largely upon statistics. And he betrayed an imperfect sense of responsibility, both in advancing destructive notions without an adequate support of argument, and in withholding the explanations and justifications required by his own numerous and sometimes disconcerting changes of opinion. His self-confidence has hypnotized his successors, and many of his improvisations recur in the works of serious students, not to speak of those school-books, compiled at starvation wages for competitive publishers, which do so much in our day for the dissemination of critical and historical error.

The mantle of Mr. Fleay has descended upon Mr. J. M. Robertson, who disposes its flying skirts into the decent folds of a logical system. His method of approach to his problems is uniform. It has three stages, upon each of which I shall have a cautionary note later. He begins with impressionist judgements. Certain passages do not answer to his conception of Shakespeare. Here is braggadocio, there an archaic stiffness, or flatness, or hackwork, or clumsy stage-craft, or pointless humour, or turgidity of thought, or falsity of moral sentiment. Or a whole play repels him. One reads like 'a mosaic of disparate parts'; in another he gets 'a strange feeling' about the general style. Then he proceeds to confirm his impressions by applying what he calls the 'inexorable' tests of treatment, style, and metrics; in particular, tests based upon the chronological phases of Shakespeare's blank verse. Finally, he settles down to look for 'clues' to the possible presence of alien hands; clues furnished by the use of words rare in Shakespeare's vocabulary, but traceable in the writings of other men; clues derived from characteristic tricks of phrase or tendencies in the handling of typical situations. It is all logical enough, given certain major premisses, largely disputable. First you decide that Shakespeare cannot be present; then you look for the intruder. Mr. Robertson has now covered most of his ground,



and tells us that, although he still has to dispose of *Cymbeline* and *The Tempest*, we are at a point where the 'idolater'—that is to say the man who believes in Shakespeare's authorship of the plays, more or less as they stand—'has probably heard what he would term "the worst"'. The worst, however, amounts to an alien invasion. In the front of a rather dim background of collaborations and revisions stand the two heroic figures, Marlowe and Chapman. I will disregard the ancient battle-fields of *Henry VI* and *Titus Andronicus*, for the campaign has now become more serious. If I understand Mr. Robertson aright, Marlowe, more than any other man, is predominantly the author of *Richard III*, *Richard II*, *Henry V*, *Julius Caesar*, and paradoxically enough *Comedy of Errors*, even in the forms in which they have reached us. Peele and Greene play minor parts, but the *Two Gentlemen* is substantially Greene's, and work of his remains embedded in *Taming of the Shrew* and *All's Well*. I gather that Peele is to be similarly revealed in *Cymbeline*. And both men, together with Kyd, Jonson, and the shades of many of Philip Henslowe's hungry troop of hack writers, Chettle, Dekker, Drayton, Heywood, and Munday, are evoked as possible contributors to a series of drafts and recasts, which the Marlovian work has undergone. Ultimately, of course, the Marlovian plays passed into the hands of Shakespeare, and they show traces of revision by him, which however was often limited to a little retouching or the insertion of particular speeches or scenes, 'substantially preserved' the original *Richard II*, and even in *Henry V* did not amount to 'vital rehandling'. Chapman, too, was among the intermediate manipulators of the earlier plays. But when Marlowe passes out of the chronicle, Chapman becomes a protagonist. His unquiet spirit flies like a lambent but smoky flame over all the later part of the canon. He may have inserted the mask into *The Tempest* after Shakespeare left it. But in the main his work underlies, rather than overlies, Shakespeare's, in the form of drafts or contributions to drafts of plays, sometimes themselves mere recasts, which Shakespeare afterwards rewrote as *Hamlet*, *Merry Wives*, *All's Well*, *Measure for Measure*, *Troilus and Cressida*, *Timon*, and *Pericles*. To Chapman I will return. The complicated nature of Mr. Robertson's reconstructions and their relation to Fleay's may be illustrated by the case of *Julius Caesar*. Marlowe is conjectured to have written a sequence of three plays: a *Caesar and Pompey*, a *Caesar's Tragedy*, a *Caesar's Revenge*. These passed to the Admiral's men at the Rose, who revived *Caesar and Pompey* and *Caesar's Tragedy*, after some revision of the latter by Chapman and Drayton, as their

two-part *Caesar and Pompey* of 1594-5. The first part was now laid aside and rewritten later by Chapman as his *Caesar and Pompey*, printed in 1631. Marlowe's original third play, *Caesar's Revenge*, was perhaps recast by Dekker, Drayton, Middleton, Munday, and Webster, in the *Caesar's Fall* or *The Two Shapes*, which they wrote for the Admiral's in 1602. However this may be, the *Tragedy* and the *Revenge*, now containing the work of from three to seven hands, were transferred by the Admiral's to the Chamberlain's company, and were revised for the latter, still in a two-play form, by Shakespeare. Finally, perhaps about 1607, the two plays were compressed into the one now extant by Ben Jonson, who added some touches of his own in a characteristic anti-Caesarian vein. More of the present substance is allowed to Shakespeare than in some of the Marlovian plays retrieved from the canon by Mr. Robertson; but the primitive Marlowe still shows through the overlay, notably in the speeches of Antony over the body of Caesar. It is entertaining to find that another recent critic, Mr. William Wells, also traces the origin of *Julius Caesar* to Marlowe. But he ascribes the revision, not to Chapman or to Jonson, but to Francis Beaumont, and only allows Shakespeare the first 57 lines of the play, lines which Mr. Robertson thinks un-Shakespearian. Evidently the disintegration of Shakespeare is an open career for talent.

Looking back over the results of Mr. Robertson's devastating offensive, I am tempted to quote my friend A. H. Bullen's comment upon a more modest raid. 'If this goes on,' he said, 'Shakespeare will soon, like his own Lord Timon,

be left a naked gull,  
Which flashes now a phoenix.'

Mr. Robertson will certainly reply that, even if witty, this is not fair. He is no despoiler of Shakespeare's authentic plumage. His eliminations touch nothing 'save inferior or second-rate work'; have not 'impugned one of the great plays as a whole, or a really great speech in any'. On the contrary, it is the sticklers for the canon who detract from Shakespeare's greatness. Battling for quantity, they sacrifice quality. 'The *vin ordinaire* of the Elizabethan drama is for them indistinguishable from the vintage of the Master.' In particular, if they will not recognize Marlowe in *Richard II* or Greene in the *Two Gentlemen*, they are driven back on the alternative theory of a Shakespeare in bondage to a humiliating trick of mimicry, a 'parrot' Shakespeare, a 'sedulous ape'. This brings me to the first of my cautionary notes upon the successive steps in Mr. Robertson's

critical progress. They are, you remember, three; the disquieting impressions, the 'inexorable' tests, the 'clues' to other men. I am sure that Mr. Robertson desires to exalt and not to depreciate Shakespeare. And that is precisely where the mischief lies. Our heresiarch, in fact, is himself an idolater. We have all of us, in the long run, got to form our conception of the 'authentic' Shakespeare by means of an abstraction from the whole of the canon; there is no other material. Mr. Robertson abstracts through a series of rejections. He is repelled by childish work, by imitative work, by repetitive work, by conventional work, by unclarified work, by clumsy construction, by baldness or bombast. He idealizes. He looks for a Shakespeare always at the top of his achievement. This seems to me quite an arbitrary process. I cannot so read the record. Magic of phrase, lyrical impulse, pervasive humour, intuition of character, the clash of drama, a questing philosophy, a firm hold on the ultimate values of life: you are never far from one or other of these at any turn in Shakespeare. But these are not the whole warp and woof of the plays. We cannot be blind to the moments of artistic oblivion or carelessness, where the brain flags or the insight fails; to the trivial scenes where quibble speaks to the boxes or horse-play to the pit; to the exasperating scenes where psychological realism makes ugly nonsense of a romantic convention; to the perfunctory scenes which amount to no more than commonplace Elizabethan dramatic carpentry. We cannot leave these out of the account; if we do, we may get an ideal, but we lose Shakespeare. Of course I can construct apologies. There are inconsistencies of narrative and time-sequence. A practical playwright knows very well that these attract little attention on the stage, although they reveal themselves to the student poring over a printed text in his study. There are jests and wit-combats which do not seem to have the ghost of a laugh left in them. What is there so fleeting, so difficult to transmit from one age to another, as that phosphoric iridescence upon the surface of social life which we call wit? But I am not looking for apologies. I come to accept Shakespeare, not to praise him. Obviously there are things in the plays which any other Elizabethan could just as well, or just as badly, have written. They do not perturb me, as they perturb Mr. Robertson, to the point of searching for clues to another man. Perhaps Mr. Robertson will reply that I have not fully met his case; that it is not so much the passages of unmannered carpenter's work which give him pause, as passages which have a manner, but a manner which he cannot feel to be Shakespeare's, and does feel,



when he analyses it, to be that of a Marlowe or of a Chapman. Here we are on more difficult ground. But it is part of the character of Shakespeare, as I read it in the canon, to be an experimentalist in style. I cannot regard the many phases through which his writing went in the short span of some twenty years as wholly due to a growth in which there was nothing deliberate. I discern abrupt beginnings and abrupt discontinuances. And he was receptive, as well as creative. I can suppose him experimenting in the manner of Marlowe, or even of poor Greene. And I can suppose him, much later, playing with stylistic elements, which had struck him in the work of Chapman, and ultimately dismissing them as, on the whole, unprofitable.

We come now to the 'inexorable' tests. These are largely metrical, based upon the familiar tables, compiled by Fleay and others, which put in statistical form the relative frequencies in each play of certain features of Shakespeare's versification, and notably the percentages of rhymes, double endings, and overflowing lines. I do not undervalue these features as elements in determining the chronology of the plays. No doubt there was a period—not, I think, his earliest period—in which Shakespeare made free use of rhyme; and thereafter even occasional rhymes dwindle. Even more important is an increasing tendency to escape from the tyranny of the 'drumming decasyllabon', and to emphasize the verse paragraph rather than the individual line, by the help of such devices as the double ending and a varied and subtle distribution of pauses. The tables need to be used with great discretion. Fleay's methods, in particular, were never 'inexorable'. His earliest tables were grossly inaccurate. He published a revised set, obscurely, in the book of another man.<sup>1</sup> I have spent much time, which might, perhaps, have been better employed, in checking some of these. They are still inaccurate, but less so. It is disquieting to find that little handbooks of facts about Shakespeare, compiled by distinguished scholars, still reproduce the unrevised tables as authoritative. Other tables, due to Goswin König, give only ratios and not the counts upon which they are based. This does not inspire confidence. If statistical precision were material, the calculations would probably have to be done afresh. I do not think that it is material. The tests cannot give an exact chronology; in fact, different tests do not give the same chronology. They can only indicate a trend of development, and the trend may be diverted in any play by accidents of subject-matter, such as refractory personal names which have to be coerced into the metre; by the appropriateness of

<sup>1</sup> C. M. Ingleby, *Shakespeare, the Man and the Book*, Part II (1881).

particular rhythms to scenes of particular temper ; above all, by Shakespeare's experimentalism, which certainly extends to rhythm. It does not therefore trouble me to find a rather high percentage of double endings in such early plays as *Comedy of Errors* and *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, and then to find the curve dropping through *Midsummer-Night's Dream*, *King John*, and *1 Henry IV*, and then rising again with *2 Henry IV* and other plays. But it does trouble Mr. Robertson, and, as he is debarred from putting *Comedy of Errors* and *Two Gentlemen* later in the chronological order, because that would throw out the overflow curve, he falls back upon a theory that they are mainly the work of other writers with metrical habits different from Shakespeare's. This longing for a smoothly progressive curve is only one aspect of a general tendency to seek an unimpeded development in Shakespeare's art. There is a philosophical predisposition behind. Mr. Robertson dislikes the idea of what he calls a 'cerebral cataclysm'. To suppose that Shakespeare passed suddenly from the merely average and imitative merit of *Two Gentlemen* to the 'supreme poetic competence' of *Midsummer-Night's Dream* is contrary to a doctrine which sees in 'artistic growth as in other organic phenomena a process of evolution'. I do not know whether the latest theories of organic evolution have solved that old *crux* of the emergence of variations. But in any case biological analogies do not help us very directly in analysing the development of the creative impulse in human consciousness. And when Mr. Robertson expresses himself as taken aback by the notion of 'a literary miracle of genius elicited by some sudden supernatural troubling of the waters', I can only reply that he has given an admirable description of the way in which genius does in fact often appear to effloresce.

I have not quite done with the percentages. Obviously they have no value, unless they are worked upon a sufficient number of lines to allow a fair average to establish itself. This is common to all statistics. The ratio of blue eyes to black ones throughout England has a statistical meaning ; the ratio in your house or mine may have a meaning, but it is not statistical. Possibly the two or three thousand lines of a play leave room for the averaging of double endings. But to work the percentage of double endings in a single speech or scene leads to nothing. Or rather, it should lead to nothing. It does sometimes lead Mr. Robertson to infer that scenes in a play which give very different percentages cannot have been written by the same hand, or at least by the same hand at the same date. Surely this is an illegitimate inference. If a play has twenty-five per cent. of double endings, they are not spread evenly at the rate



of one double ending in every four lines.<sup>1</sup> They come in nuggets here; there are considerable spaces without them. Largely this is mere accident; they just fall so. But clearly that adaptation of rhythm to subject-matter, which may qualify the general trend of metric development in a whole play, is even more potent in single passages. Here are two examples. The first scene of *King John* is largely a discussion of the paternity of the Bastard Faulconbridge. And the rhetoric requires the emphatic use of the words 'father', 'mother', 'brother', at the ends of lines. These words account for about half the double endings in the scene, and the percentage, which for the play as a whole is 6, goes up in this scene to 16. Take again *Coriolanus*, a play which Mr. Robertson has not yet assailed, or expressed an intention of assailing. The double ending percentage is 28. But in v. 3 is a passage of twenty-four lines without one double ending and another of thirty-five lines with only three. One contains the stately interchange of courtesies between Coriolanus and his wife and mother on their entry to Corioli; the other the more solemn part of Volumnia's appeal to her son. Are these, therefore, un-Shakespearian or debris of early Shakespearian work?

My third cautionary note is on the final stage of Mr. Robertson's process, the quest for alien hands, with the clues of vocabulary and phraseology. Here I will be brief, for the land is unmapped and the footing treacherous. Are we really able to ascribe a distinctive diction to each of Shakespeare's predecessors? Do they not largely, together with the young Shakespeare himself, use a common poetic diction, much of it ultimately traceable to Spenser and to Sidney? We could tell better, if we knew more clearly what each of them wrote and did not write. The problem seems to me one which calls for exploration upon a general and disinterested method, rather than along the casual lines of advance opened up by the pursuit of an author for this or that suspected or anonymous play. The relation of Shakespeare's maturer diction to Chapman's is a problem of a somewhat different kind. There is not much point in a controversy as to which was the greater neologist. They both innovate freely, and apparently in much the same manner; and, as far as I know, Shakespeare at least was not likely to have had any scruple about using neologisms not of his own mintage. If he borrowed his plots, why should he not borrow his words? Nobody would suppose that he could not mint them fast

<sup>1</sup> I am told that the term 'double endings' puzzled some of my hearers. They are also called 'feminine endings', and are those in which the stressed second syllable of the last foot of a line is followed by an additional unstressed syllable.

enough, if he wanted to. It certainly does not move me to be told that Chapman must have worked over a scene, because it contains words not found elsewhere in Shakespeare, but found half a dozen times in Chapman. The oftener Chapman used a word, the more likely it was to stick in Shakespeare's memory. But Chapman is the recurrent *deus ex machina* of Mr. Robertson's speculations upon half a dozen plays of the canon. Writing about *Hamlet*, he formulates a theory of

‘A frequent employment of Chapman by Shakespeare's company either as a draftsman or as an adapter of plays, and as a “repairer” or patcher of some; and the corollary that Shakespeare, often revising Chapman's work, which he must frequently have found trying, might very well let pass, as appealing to sections of the audience, *genre* and other work which he for his own part would never have thought of penning.’

It all seems to have begun with *Timon*, and here a more intimate relation between the poets is revealed. *Timon* is a play ‘imperfectly drafted’ by Chapman and ‘imperfectly revised’ by Shakespeare. Mr. Robertson, like some others, thinks that Chapman was the ‘rival poet’ of the *Sonnets* and the Holophernes of *Love's Labour's Lost*. But this was merely a ‘humorous quarrel with his testy rival’, and after all the two men ‘had a common patron’, and ‘there is no difficulty in conceiving that, with or without the patron's intervention, Shakespeare's company may have bought a play of Chapman's for Shakespeare to adapt’. We are bidden to remember that Chapman was poor and that Shakespeare must have seen that he was ‘worth help ng’. The greater poet had ‘no artistic jealousy’, and knew that ‘the quality of mercy is not strained’, and ‘even if Chapman had ruffled him somewhat by his pedantic asperities, he of all men best knew the human struggle behind the “paste-board portico”, the weakness under the shining armour of literary bravado’. Mr. Robertson is an austere rationalist, but I think that this little fantasy would have evoked comment even in the pages of Shakespeare's more sentimental biographers. However this may be, I find it difficult to fit this employment of Chapman by Shakespeare's company into the probabilities of literary history. We know a good deal about Chapman, at any rate from about 1596, when he begins to appear in Henslowe's diary. He wrote, or began to write, seven plays for the Admiral's men during the next three years, of which two were published, and one was a considerable financial success. And he is conspicuous in Henslowe's motley crew as the one who held most aloof from anything in the way of collaboration. The only exception is a play which he

undertook, but quite possibly never finished, on a plot by Ben Jonson. About 1599 he drops out of Henslowe's record, and the next decade is covered by a long series of nine plays, all of which were published, for the boy companies. One of these was written in collaboration with Jonson and Marston. Thereafter, so far as we know, Chapman abandoned stage-writing, and devoted himself to his translation of Homer and to other non-dramatic work. In 1613, however, he did a mask for the Princess Elizabeth's wedding. He lived to 1634, and it is conceivable that in Caroline days he touched up some of his early plays, or lent a hand to the younger playwright, Shirley. The only trace of any external evidence for a connexion of Chapman with the Chamberlain's or King's men is the ascription to him by the publisher Moseley, in 1654, of *Alphonsus Emperor of Germany*. Hardly any one now believes that he wrote *Alphonsus*, which was produced at the Blackfriars in 1636, two years after his death, and twenty after Shakespeare's. The Stationers' Register names the author as John Poole. All this is, of course, no proof that Chapman did not write for Shakespeare's company, concurrently with the Admiral's or the boys. A dramatist, who was not himself an actor, was not tied to a single paymaster. But Chapman was evidently a successful writer from 1596 onwards. He is one of the seven lauded by Webster in 1612. And it does not seem to me likely, on *a priori* grounds, that he would have needed Shakespeare's patronage for an introduction to the company; that no work done by him for them would have reached publication; that his temper would have submitted to constant revision by Shakespeare; or that, if his work proved unsatisfactory, the company would have continued the experiment over half a dozen plays.

I have slipped from the internal to the external evidence on the canon. Mr. Robertson is rather cavalier with the external evidence. Of the Folio editors he says:

'We may pardon the players for obstinately specifying as Shakespeare's works—in order to maintain their hold on the copyrights about which they are so obviously and so naturally anxious—a collection of plays as to which they knew and we know that much of the writing is not Shakespeare's at all.'

I am not concerned to argue for the literal inspiration of the Folio. It is quite conceivable that in some cases a substantial Shakespearian contribution, short of full authorship, may have been held to justify the inclusion of a play. But it was certainly not an indiscriminating collection, since it left out, for one reason or another, no less than nine plays which had already been printed under Shakespeare's name or



initials. And what has copyright to do with the matter? I do not know what copyright Mr. Robertson thinks that the players claimed in published plays; but, so far as our knowledge goes, no kind of printing copyright existed, which could be strengthened by ascribing a play to a particular author. As for Francis Meres, he, we are told, 'simply stated the claim of the theatre company, which the Folio enforces'. Meres was a schoolmaster and divine, with an interest in literature, but not, as far as we know, in any relations with the players, such as might lead him to act as their catspaw in a commercial fraud. Even if he went to the players for his list, there is no reason to suppose that they told him anything but the truth. The facts must have been well enough known in the London of 1598, and any false claim for Shakespeare would have been open to the challenge of Chapman or another. The testimony of Meres, even if it stood alone, would be at least as good evidence for Shakespeare's authorship of the early plays of the canon as we have for Peele's authorship of *The Arraignment of Paris* in a casual reference by Nashe, or for Kyd's authorship of *The Spanish Tragedy* in a casual reference by Heywood, or for Marlowe's authorship of *Tamburlaine*, of which there is no contemporary record at all. Yet take away these, and Mr. Robertson's whole elaborate edifice of conjectural ascriptions falls to the ground.

I will now leave Mr. Robertson and his Marlowe and Chapman complexes. I turn to the parallel speculations started by Professor Pollard and pursued by Mr. Dover Wilson in his new edition of the plays. Here the problem of the canon is approached from another angle. The emphasis is less upon versification and diction than upon critical bibliography; the study of printing-house usage in handling copy, of the relation which the copy for the plays may have borne to Shakespeare's autograph, of the changes which that copy may have undergone before and after it reached his hands. The methods of critical bibliography are a notable addition to the equipment of scholarship. But scepticism may be permitted as to whether they really carry the superstructure of theory about the revision of the canonical plays, which Mr. Wilson is piling upon them. His work is, of course, only beginning. It has now covered seven of the comedies, and not one of them is allowed to be an integral and untouched product of Shakespeare's creative energy, in the form in which he first conceived and wrought it. Inevitably I throw Mr. Wilson's cautious and modestly expressed hypotheses into more categorical statements. *Comedy of Errors* is 'of Shakespeare's writing in the main', but it is a revision of an older play, perhaps the

*Historie of Error* given by a boy company at court in 1577; and of this parts have been retained, including the doggerel, none of which is Shakespeare's. Moreover, the extant text is an abridgement made in the playhouse by two distinct scribes. *Two Gentlemen* is also an abridgement, with passages added by the adapter, who contributed the whole character of Speed. *Love's Labour's Lost* was based by Shakespeare upon a play by a writer of the 'eighties. He himself gave it a revision, and may then have eliminated bits of the original which he at first let stand. Traces of the first Shakespearian version are left, owing to imperfect cancellation in the copy. The Folio text shows some further playhouse alteration. *Much Ado* contains two strata of Shakespearian work, and has therefore also been revised. There is no obvious indication of a second hand, although an earlier play may have served as a source. Here again there are playhouse alterations in the Folio text. *Merry Wives* is a transformation by Shakespeare, 'perhaps, with help from others', of an earlier play, *The Jealous Comedy*, of which parts remain. There may have been an intermediate version. I do not understand Mr. Wilson to regard *The Jealous Comedy* as Shakespeare's own. In *Measure for Measure*, Shakespeare may only have recast an old play, with a history going back to Whetstone's *Promos and Cassandra*. But the text, as we have it, has undergone a double adaptation by later hands; firstly an abridgement, secondly an expansion, accompanied by the re-writing of Shakespearian verse-scenes as prose. Finally, *The Tempest* has had a pre-history and a post-history. Substantially, it is a late recast by Shakespeare of an earlier play, perhaps his own, and at this recast, matter originally played in scenes before the wreck has been put into narrative form. Then the recast has itself been abridged, mainly by Shakespeare, and into the abridgement has been inserted the mask, the authorship of which is left undetermined. Mr. Wilson does not, it will be seen, extrude Shakespeare from any of the seven comedies in as wholesale a fashion as that in which Mr. Robertson extrudes him from *Richard II* or *Henry V*. But he finds much alloy due to earlier versions and much alloy due to later adaptations; and these, together with the habit ascribed to Shakespeare of revising his own work, produce sufficiently ambiguous results.

Implicit in it all is the doctrine of continuous copy. The foundation of this doctrine has, I think, four corner-stones. The first is a notion of theatrical precaution and economy; precaution in not having too many copies of a play about, lest one should fall into the hands of a rival company; economy, in avoiding unnecessary expenditure upon copyist's charges. The second is the actual

condition of a particular manuscript which has been preserved, that of *Sir Thomas More*. This has been plausibly shown by Dr. Greg to have been originally written out in a single hand; then altered in several other hands, partly by cancellations and marginal insertions on the original pages, and partly by tearing off some of the original pages and substituting separate slips; then submitted to a censor and marked by him with directions for the modification of disallowed passages; and finally, or at an earlier stage, gone through by a stage-manager, who added some technical notes for the production. Thirdly, there is the obvious re-writing, scene for scene, of the *Contention of York and Lancaster* as 2 and 3 *Henry VI*. And, fourthly, there is the courageous attempt of Professor Pollard and Mr. Wilson themselves to explain the relation of the 'bad' to the 'good' Quartos of certain Shakespearian plays by a theory which entails the progressive revision of lost versions. And so we arrive at the notion of the long-lived manuscript in the tiring-house wardrobe, periodically taken out for a revival and as often worked upon by fresh hands, abridged and expanded, recast to fit the capabilities of new performers, brightened with current topical allusions, written up to date to suit new tastes in poetic diction. Additional scenes may be inserted. If the old pages will no longer hold the new matter, they may be mutilated and replaced by partial transcripts. In the end hardly a single line may remain as it was in the beginning. Yet, in a sense, it is the same play, even as our human bodies, the cellular matter of which is continuously renewed, remain our bodies from the cradle to the grave. A perpetual form; an evanescent  $\psi\lambda\eta$ ! Who is the author of such a play? We cannot tell. The soul gets a 'dusty answer', when hot on that particular certainty.

Again I will attempt one or two general propositions bearing upon the issue. I feel some doubt whether the case of *Sir Thomas More* is altogether typical; whether, that is to say, the Master of the Revels would as a rule have been willing to accept for reading a play in the state of picturesque confusion which characterizes that famous document. Professor Pollard, I gather, thinks that he would, and explains it by a reference to 'the easy temper of English officialdom at all periods'. Well, Mr. Pollard is an English official, and so am I, and that is the kind of compliment we bandy between ourselves. Comments in a different tone sometimes drift in to us from the outside world. I am sure, however, that if the Master of the Revels had to tackle many manuscripts like *Sir Thomas More*, that progressive increase in his emoluments, which is a feature in the history of the office during the seventeenth century, was well justified. And



personally I feel that his instinct would have been to call for clean transcripts. Clean transcripts would, of course, be fatal to the doctrine of continuous copy in its extreme form, and in the preparation of them most of the bibliographical evidence, upon which Mr. Wilson relies to prove the revision of plays, would disappear. That any substantial revision, as distinct perhaps from a mere abridgement, would entail a fresh application for the Master's allowance must, I think, be taken for granted. The rule was that his hand must be 'at the latter end of the booke they doe play'; and in London, at least, any company seriously departing from the allowed book would run a considerable risk.<sup>1</sup>

Whether the manuscript of *Sir Thomas More* is typical or not, Mr. Wilson has, of course, no such direct evidence for any play of the canon. He supplies its place by pointing to indications of what he calls 'bibliographical disturbance' in the early editions, departures from typographical uniformity, such as the use for printer's copy of an analogous revised manuscript might explain. There are passages written as blank verse, but set up by the printer as prose. There are incomplete lines of verse, taken by Mr. Wilson as signs of 'cuts'. There are passages which duplicate one another and suggest the accidental survival of alternative versions. There are variations of nomenclature in speech-headings and stage-directions, which may betray composition by different hands or at different dates. It may be observed that, while bibliography can constitute the existence of these phenomena, and can sometimes contribute to an explanation of them from a knowledge of printing-house methods, it can by no means always give a full explanation. And then the bibliographer, like the rest of us, has to fall back upon what he can learn or guess of the methods of the tiring-house, or upon his own insight into literary psychology. Thus the setting up of verse as prose is explained, prettily enough, as due to the failure of compositors to appreciate the metrical character of insertions written continuously in cramped margins. But if you ask why any particular insertion was made, bibliography is dumb. Mr. Wilson tends to guess that it was made as part of a general revision. I find myself often guessing

<sup>1</sup> This raises a further question. Did the Master himself keep copies of allowed books for purposes of control? Certainly Herbert laid down in 1633 that such copies must be furnished to him by the book-keepers, but it is not clear whether he was establishing a new or asserting an old practice. A reference to the burning of Sir George Buck's books suggests the latter. But this also is obscure; it is possible that these were not books kept by Buck, but licensed by him, and burnt at the Fortune in 1621.

that it was only an after-thought at the time of original writing. Similarly, a broken line may be, and I dare say often is, due to a 'cut', but it may also be a mere rhythmical variation and it may often indicate a dramatic pause, for reflection or the insertion of stage business. And it is not bibliographical knowledge, but a feeling for rhythm and dramatic values, that must determine the most likely explanation in each case. Mr. Wilson is, of course, just as well qualified to apply the literary as the bibliographical criteria. But the doctrine of continuous copy seems to have a great fascination for him.

I will draw to a close with some 'external' reasons for thinking that the amount of revision in the canon is not likely to be very great. The 'revival' of old plays was familiar to the Elizabethan stage. I first note the technical phase in a letter of 1605, which states that the King's men had 'revived' *Love's Labour's Lost*. 'Revived' is printed 'revised' by a contributor to Mr. Wilson's edition; that is a mere slip, but revival and revision are not synonymous. The distinction between a new and a revived play has financial implications in Sir Henry Herbert's office notes of 1622-42. In 1628 he secured from the King's men a 'benefit' during each summer and winter, 'to be taken out of the second daye of a revived play'. In 1633 he laid down that 'ould revived playes', as well as 'new' ones, must be brought for allowance, and fixed or confirmed fees of £2 for reading a new play and £1 for an old one. He has a significant entry of the £1 on one occasion, as being for allowance 'to add scenes to an ould play and to give it out for a new one'. After the Restoration, a dispute, of which we have not the conclusion, arose as to whether the Master's fee 'for supervising reviv'd plaies' was of ancient custom, and as to 'how long plaies may be laid asyde, ere he shall judge them to be reviv'd'. All this is late evidence and complicated by Herbert's bureaucratic tendency to magnify his office and multiply his emoluments. But the notions involved were clearly ancient, and even at the Rose a measure of revision probably entitled a 'revived' play to rank as 'new'. When Henslowe marks *Longshanks* in his diary as n.e. we need not suppose that we have to do with anything but a recast of Peele's *Edward I*. There was money in it. Even if the entrance charges for a new play were not higher, novelty had its appeal to the Elizabethan temperament. Dekker and Jonson have their laugh at the poets employed as 'play-patchers' and 'play-dressers'. I dare say the process was often only colourable. 'New titles warrant not a play for new,' says a seventeenth-century prologue. On the other hand, a popular stock play,



a 'get-penny', might draw well enough at a revival, without revision. Revision then, as well as revival, is a *vera causa* on the Elizabethan stage. It is more difficult to give a quantitative estimate of its frequency. But something can be collected from Henslowe's dealings with the Admiral's men, and something at a later date from Herbert's notes. During the six years from 1597 to 1603 the Admiral's men acquired about 100 new plays, paying fees to the poets which exclude any probability that we have only to do with 'new titles'. Of these we can trace the actual production of about 50, from the purchase for them of new garments and properties; others may, of course, have been furnished from the existing tiring-house stock. As against the 50 new plays, we can trace on similar evidence about 23 revivals. These had probably been exceptionally successful old plays, since 13 of them have come down to us in print, a quite disproportionate number, in view of the oblivion which has overtaken most of the 300 or so plays named by Henslowe. But most of these revivals do not seem to have been accompanied by any substantial payments to poets for carrying out the work. There are ten payments. Three are small sums for 'altering' or 'mending' plays, in one case a new and not a revived one, for the court, presumably as a result of the special scrutiny which plays selected for court performance underwent from the Revels officers. Three others are only for the provision of prologues and epilogues, in one case also for the court. There are, therefore, during these six years and for these 23 revivals, only four cases of substantial revision, carrying substantial fees to the poets.<sup>1</sup> We have three of the four revised plays, and two of them we have both in the revised and the unrevised forms, so that we can see exactly what took place. They are *Doctor Faustus* and *The Spanish Tragedy*; in each case the revision amounted to the insertion of new scenes into an otherwise substantially unaltered text. The third play is *Old Fortunatus*. Here we have only the revised text; the original was probably written in two parts, and the revision compressed them into one. Henslowe's record, therefore, bears very little testimony to any widespread practice of revising plays upon revival. It bears still less to any literary recasting of the whole substance of revived plays, such as the theories which I have sketched envisage. I do not overlook the possible difference in methods between Shakespeare's company and the Admiral's. Two plays belonging to the

<sup>1</sup> The normal payment for a new play was £6. The revision of *Dr. Faustus* and *Tasso's Melancholy* cost in each case £4; that of *The Spanish Tragedy* £2 and an unspecified part of £10; that of *Old Fortunatus* £9, including some further alterations for the court.

former, outside the canon, have undergone alteration of known character. One is *The Malcontent*, the other *Mucedorus*; in both the revision took the form of inserting scenes, not of stylistic rehandling. Jonson, no doubt, re-wrote *Every Man in his Humour*, before the folio of 1616, and replaced the work of a collaborator by his own in *Sejanus*, before publication. But Jonson's literary attitude to his 'Works' is too personal to be taken as representative.

I come now to Sir Henry Herbert's notes. Such extracts from these as have been preserved record 130 licences for the production of plays between 1622 and 1642. Only fifteen were old plays, and in only seven is there any record of revision. One is a play of Fletcher's 'corrected' by Shirley; one had undergone 'renewing' and one 'alterations'; four had had one or more scenes added. We cannot be sure that the eighteenth-century scholars took all such notices out of Herbert's office-book, while it was available. And we cannot be sure that the Elizabethans and Jacobean were not fonder of re-writing plays than the Carolines. But, for what it is worth, Herbert's evidence tends to confirm Henslowe's.

We ought to be very grateful to Mr. Robertson and Mr. Dover Wilson. We had come to think that all the critical questions about Shakespeare were disposed of; the biographical facts and even a little more than the facts chronicled, the canon and the apocrypha fixed, the chronological order determined, the text established; that there was not much left to be done with Shakespeare, except perhaps to read him. They have shown us that it is not so; and we must now go over the ground again, and turn our notional assents, with whatever modifications may prove justified, into real assents. We have all the spring joy of re-digging a well-tilled garden.



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